

NEWSMAKER: Fiona Simson

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Passion and land 'too precious to dig up' drive this farmer, writes Debra Jopson.

WORDS bubble out of Fiona Simson, the Gunnedah grazier largely responsible for the state's supreme mining body spitting out the shocking accusation that the NSW Farmers Association is extreme and now aligned with the Greens.

Simson is only a little surprised at the NSW Mineral Council's reaction to her association's call for a moratorium on all new mining and gas extraction projects until a fresh map of the state is drawn to quarantine productive agricultural land too precious to dig up.

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"Farmers don't do moratoriums, usually. We are people who generally talk and are known to be laconic, laid-back sort of people," she says.

Simson, 46, is neither and confesses between radio interviews that she is a passionate person whose flaw may be to talk too much.

The talk is of environmental sustainability, of unbalanced planning and mining laws that she says give extractive industries too much power and coal seam gas development "proceeding at breakneck speed". But she is no Green.

At the bottom of her CV, which includes a Canberra University bachelor of business, TAFE teaching roles and her presidency (as mother to Jemima) of the Abbotsleigh Boarder Parents Association, she specifies: "No political affiliations".

Part of her passion for the cause is derived from her wish to see her son Tom, aged 18 and in year 12 at The King's School, take over the 5500-hectare family property at Premer, 50 kilometres south-west of Gunnedah, and a commercial cattle enterprise in Queensland.

This passion catapulted her two years ago onto Liverpool Plains Shire Council and into the vice-presidency of the Farmers Association simultaneously.

The association's overwhelmingly male greyheads expressing a new militancy through her seem bemused by her zest. She drew guffaws from the 70 or so at an executive meeting in Sydney this week when she spoke from the podium of one "being my little boy" as he handed out the association's proposed state strategic plan.

In country tradition, she is firmly a "Mrs". Growing up on an Armidale farm, she yearned for the city. She went to Denmark as a high school exchange student and worked in Sydney in numerous jobs, including human relations, before marriage to her husband, Ed, in 1988 took her back to the bush.

"His family were originally from Victoria," she says. "They left, ironically enough, because of the gold rush way back in the 1800s ... Back then it was all conflicts between people accessing the minerals underground and the rights that people had on the surface of the ground and it's pretty much the same now."

A partner in the family farming business, her acuity in business administration four years ago led to an invitation to be the secretary of the Caroon Coal Action Group, which has campaigned against mining destroying agriculture on the Liverpool Plains.

"We started taking cases to the Mining Warden's Court," she says. "That process was appalling, and each appalling process that I witnessed made me more determined that I had to keep going, despite it being an enormous fight and an enormous industry."

Life and times

Elected to the NSW Farmers Association executive in 2008, becoming chairwoman of its mining taskforce last year and vice-president this year.

She and other executive members have held 10 months of negotiations with the state opposition over the policy on mining and farmland it will implement if elected in March.

This week she led the association's hardened stance, calling for a "pause" of all new mining and gas projects while a state plan guaranteeing prime farmland protection is devised.